



## Moral Self-Cultivation East and West: A Critique

The idea that human beings can and should cultivate their own virtue or vice is prevalent both in Western philosophy and in the Confucian ethical tradition, but in this chapter I hope to show you that this idea is in important ways psychologically unrealistic and questionable. I shall first discuss what the Confucian tradition has said about moral self-cultivation and then talk about what Western philosophers—most influentially, Aristotle and Kant—have had to say on the subject of making oneself virtuous or morally vicious. But self-cultivation or self-shaping is just one way one might conceive moral development or moral education, and I would like to begin by saying something briefly about recent theories (in the West) concerning moral development generally.

### 1

Let's first talk about Lawrence Kohlberg's "cognitive-developmentalism."<sup>1</sup> Kohlberg's approach derives in great part from the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, and both Piaget and Kohlberg saw the teaching and learning of morality in neo-Kantian terms as essentially a cognitive process. Following Piaget, Kohlberg saw moral development and reasoning as

<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-developmental approach," in T. Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Moral Behavior: Theory, Research, and Social Issues*, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, pp. 31–53.

occurring through three basic levels: the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the post-conventional, with attainment of the final level characterized by an ability to think of moral problems in terms of very general or abstract principles like Kant's Categorical Imperative. But Kohlberg's account of how moral *thinking* develop doesn't do much to explain the origins and development of moral *motivation*, the desire actually to do what (more and more advanced) moral injunctions and principles tell us we ought to do. This point has been made by numerous critics, and Kohlberg himself allows that purely cognitive development cannot ensure substantial moral motivation. He even talks about empathy as somehow involved in moving (people) beyond the cognizance of moral norms to reliable moral motivation, but he never nails any of this down, and I shall argue here that empathy gives us our best purchase both on moral motivation and on how moral education most readily occurs.

Nowadays, we English-speakers tend to distinguish empathy from sympathy in a fairly uniform way. Roughly speaking, empathy is what Bill Clinton was self-ascribing when he famously said: I feel your pain. But sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone who is in pain and wanting to do something or see something done about it. Some more mature "feats" of empathy can depend on our possession of certain concepts and on cognitive maturation/learning more generally: as when we empathize with some whole group of people we have never met, for example, the starving or oppressed people of a certain country. Most importantly for present purposes, many contemporary psychologists hold that our altruistic and general moral tendencies depend on and are strengthened by our being empathic. And let me now say something more specific about how they view these matters.

The first step toward understanding the role of empathy in moral development was made, I believe, by the psychologist Martin Hoffman.<sup>2</sup> Hoffman holds that the development of altruistic moral motivation and behavior requires the intervention of parents and others making use of what he calls "inductive discipline" or often just "induction." Induction contrasts with the "power-asserting" attempt to discipline, train, or influence a child through sheer threats (carried out if the child doesn't comply) and with attempts to inculcate moral thought, motivation, and behavior (merely) by citing or admonishing with explicit moral precepts or

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

injunctions. Inductive training depends, rather, on the child's initial capacity for empathy with others and involves (say) a parent's noticing when their child hurts others and then (in a non-threatening but firm manner) making the child vividly aware of the harm that he or she has done—most notably by getting the child to focus on and feel how things must feel for the child whom they have hurt. This leads the normal child with a good relationship with his or her parents to feel bad—a kind of rudimentary guilt—about what s/he has done.

Hoffman believes that if such training is applied consistently over time, the child will come to associate bad feelings (guilt) with situations in which the harm s/he can do is not yet done, an association that is functionally autonomous of parents' or others' actual intervention and constitutes or supports altruistic motivation. And he also holds that this process helps to support the motivational efficacy of moral rules and moral injunctions when these are (eventually) directed at the child. In addition, he says that educative techniques similar to induction can reinforce or strengthen children's empathy with and concern for other people generally. Both parents and schools can expose children to literature, films, or television programs that make the troubles and tragedies of distant or otherwise-unknown (groups of) people vivid to them—and they can encourage their empathic sensitivity to such people by asking students/children to imagine how they or some family member would feel if such things were happening to them or if *they themselves* had caused such things to happen to others.

But empathy plays another role in induction and in moral education more generally that Hoffman never mentions. When parents use induction, they demonstrate an empathic concern for the (say) child who has been hurt by their own child, and there is in fact no reason why a child can't take in such an attitude or such motivation directly from their parent.<sup>3</sup> Hume (in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and elsewhere) held that people's basic feelings can spread to others by contagion or infusion, but he also believed that moral opinions and attitudes can spread in that way. So in most cases induction will not only involve a parent's deliberately making their child more empathically sensitive to the welfare or feelings of others, but also the child's directly taking in, by a kind of empathic osmosis, the parent's own empathic concern for others. (The parents function as a model for the child, but the child may not be consciously aware that this is happening.) And the taking in of parental attitudes or dispositions

<sup>3</sup> See Nancy Eisenberg, *The Caring Child*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

will presumably not be limited to occasions where induction is employed, but will occur or be occurring at other times when the child notices how empathically altruistic their parent is. So there are at least two important and understandable ways—induction and modeling—in which empathic concern for other people can be strengthened and the aim(s) of moral education furthered, but notice that neither of these processes involves deliberate or conscious self-cultivation or self-shaping on the part of the child.

However, we now need to consider what the Aristotelian tradition has to say about how moral education occurs. Aristotelianism (along with the largely American school of “character education” that takes itself as in certain ways derivative from Aristotelianism) regards the moral education of any given individual as typically involving quite a lot of input from other people. But the Aristotelian emphasis is on habituation, on repetitive and habitual activity. According to Aristotle, parents can accustom their children to doing the right thing in various situations, and developing rational insight will then (somehow) work together with good habits in facilitating and motivating right actions after the child is no longer under parental tutelage.

The habituation or repetition that parents impose seems, however, to be more a matter of power assertion than of any other motivating factor, and as is well known, power assertion is much less effective than empathically-grounded induction in developing or enhancing altruistic concern for others.<sup>4</sup> I am saying, therefore, that Aristotle and Aristotelianism emphasize repetition and habituation, but don’t offer us a satisfactory explanation of the role these play in the process of moral education. The Aristotelian methodology of or for moral education seems much less likely to create morally altruistic individuals than methods that rely explicitly and deeply on factors relating to empathy. But this is just the beginning of what I shall be saying here about the problems and prospects of Aristotelian moral education. When I discuss Aristotle’s views about the voluntariness of moral character further along in this chapter, I will return to the issue of habituation and discuss it in a somewhat fuller way. But I think we have already seen enough to make us suspicious about the Aristotelian picture of moral education, and I think it is now time to see how the previous discussion bears on the question whether moral self-cultivation makes realistic and plausible sense in the terms in which the Chinese traditions have described and advocated it.

<sup>4</sup> See Eisenberg, *op. cit.*

## 2

The idea of (deliberate) moral self-cultivation entails a process that an individual can take charge of and accomplish largely through his or her own efforts. When we talk of self-education in specific school subjects, we mean that an individual learns more and more geography or mathematics largely (though not necessarily entirely) on his or her own, and the same is true across a quite wide range of reflexive verbs. Chinese thinkers often say or imply that individuals can at some point undertake their own moral self-cultivation and become more virtuous through what are basically (though they don't have to be exclusively) their own efforts, but I have doubts about this.

Modeling and induction don't give us good examples of deliberate moral self-cultivation, but let us spread our net more widely and consider a case where, unlike standard cases of modeling and induction, the individual who improves morally has to engage in a certain amount of (*self*-)reflection. Imagine, for instance, a factory owner who has always been quite insensitive to the feelings of his workers; he has been haughty with them and hard on them, and the employees for their part have always kept their feelings about their employer pretty well hidden. One day, however, he is in the factory and acting in his usual haughty manner, and (for some unexplained reason) he turns around suddenly to where no one has expected him to be looking. When he does so, he notices a look of fear and distaste on the face of one of the workers, and the factory owner immediately also sees that that face represents a response to the way he, the owner, has just been acting. This shakes him out of his usual mood and manner and makes him leave the factory immediately; and once he does, he starts reflecting on the meaning of what he has just seen. He soon (or eventually) realizes that what he has seen is just the tip of the iceberg. He was acting no differently today from the way he has always acted, but this time, by a kind of moral luck, he saw the reaction he caused in a given worker; and he is now able to generalize this, to recognize that he has hurt the feelings of a lot of people in the factory and not just on one occasion but over many years.

Such reflection will quite possibly lead the factory owner to become more sensitive to the feelings of his employees and of others as well. The result might be quite similar to what induction is supposed to bring about in children: namely, a greater empathic sensitivity to the feelings of others and a (greater) reluctance to do certain kinds of things that hurt or harm

people. But although the case of the factory owner doesn't involve anyone else teaching him a deliberate moral lesson and does involve a certain amount of self-reflection (reflection, e.g., on the meaning of the given worker's hurt look), I don't think we yet have an example of moral self-cultivation. Moral self-cultivation is something one deliberately sets out to do, and this factory owner had no intention of becoming a better person as a result of his trip to his own factory on a given morning. Yet this is what happened, and it happened because of external factors (that look!) that had totally unanticipated *effect* on both his feelings and his life. Therefore, if moral learning or education can occur through a process of moral self-cultivation, we need some other kind of example to demonstrate that possibility, and although I believe it is possible to find such examples, I think they are fairly rare, fairly difficult to come by. And as I hope to show you in what follows, that very rareness gives us reason to wonder about the overall usefulness and feasibility of the kind of overall or large-scale moral self-cultivation Chinese thought has emphasized the need for and desirability of. No Chinese thinker has ever said that successful moral development cannot occur in the absence of educative help from others, but I hope that by the time you reach the end of this chapter you will agree with me that such moral development is psychologically impossible. To develop morally we very much need the help or influence of others. (I have been shaping my discussion here to take account of suggestions that have been made by Huang Yong.)

However, I am absolutely not denying that moral self-cultivation ever occurs. In certain circumstances it can occur in a somewhat limited way. Consider, for example, a Caucasian American man married to a very Americanized Korean-American woman. The woman has introduced him to her very traditional family, and although the Caucasian man tries to keep his reactions to himself, he doesn't entirely succeed. He finds the family weird and unattractive, and it turns out that his brother-in-law has noticed this fact about him. The man finds this out through his wife's telling him so, and he immediately feels very bad about what has been happening. His wife is very understanding, very forgiving, about it all, but the man himself feels he hasn't tried hard enough to understand and warm to his in-laws, and upon reflection he decides to do something very specific to make things better. He decides to read a lot of Korean history and literature in order to become more sympathetic with that culture and with his own new family (also for the sake of future children), and if he carries out this resolution, it will be an example of very deliberate moral self-

cultivation. In fact, the educative process he has deliberately chosen may end up making him more sensitive to the Korean culture and to Korean people and to some extent, therefore, a better person.

But notice two things about this example. It depends, in the first instance, on the intervention or input of others. He doesn't think to cultivate his empathic sensitivity to Korean people all on his own, but decides to do that in response to what he wife tells him. Second, this is a very unusual example. Maybe people *should* go around reading series of books in order to become more empathic with others, but it doesn't often happen, and it isn't realistic to expect it to start happening very often. And the reason why is that the event that led the Caucasian who has married a Korean-American to undertake a course of readings in Korean history and literature is a fairly rare and unpredictable one. To be sure, such events do happen to people, but it doesn't seem reasonable to expect such events to occur often enough to help everyone become more (and more) sensitive and altruistic. If we want altruism and moral virtue, we need to use the techniques of moral education I spoke about earlier. But this assumes that the example of moral self-cultivation I have just described is basically the only kind of example one can realistically find, and I believe this goes against the entire tradition of Confucian moral teaching(s). So I propose now to consider what some of the main figures of Chinese Confucian ethical thought have to say on the topic of moral self-cultivation.

### 3

Let's begin our discussion with Kongzi (Confucius). The *Analects* contains a good deal of wisdom about moral education/learning and other topics. But I want to confine my comments to what Kongzi says about moral self-cultivation. Kongzi believed that people could or can fundamentally transform or shape themselves in moral terms, and he speaks of rituals or rites as helpful in effecting moral (self-)transformation. Many of his followers lay similar stress on rites or rituals as helpful to moral learning or education. But I wonder how many rituals actually help to make people better as people.

Take ritualized or institutionalized athletic contests. Kongzi seems to have thought that such contests take aggressive energy away from more destructive or divisive activities, and he may have been right about this.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Analects* (any edition) 3.7.

But does an interest in and devotion to athletic contests do anything more than make people temporarily less aggressive? Does it transform them in such a way that they later become less aggressive and *less in need* of athletic contexts to draw off their aggressive energies? I see no reason to think so, though we would need to appeal to social science (or the science of biology?) to help us with this question.

Consider other kinds of ritualized behavior, cases where the term “ritual” actually seems more apt than it does in reference to most athletic contests. Imagine, for example, that there are certain ceremonies that parents take their children to and that require the children to sit still for a while and to take in certain aspects or elements of their own religious or ethical culture. Kongzi and his followers seem to have thought that such rituals were/are likely to curb children’s bad habits, make them more patient, more willing to cooperate in social institutions and enterprises. But I don’t know. If the children are made to sit through the rituals, perhaps they will resent what they have to do or go through, and perhaps they will “itch” not to have to do what they are being required by their parents to do. Maybe they will try to avoid such rituals whenever they can get away with it, and maybe the rituals, rather than increasing their patience, will make them less patient with what life requires of them. Who knows? The Confucians assume that the rituals will have various good effects on the character of those who participate in them, but with children at least the participation is typically not voluntary. The parents exert various forms of power assertion in order to get their children to attend church or regularly go through traditional and institutionalized social ceremonies, and the literature of psychology suggests that power assertion *isn’t* very effective in making people more caring and altruistic—and may actually tend to have the opposite effect (children can *resent* their parents or the priests who force them to sit through, go through, various potentially tedious ceremonies). Of course, if children love their parents, they may empathically pick up on their parents’ positive attitudes toward given rituals, but it is still unclear how any of that could make them become more moral or altruistic, and in any event this would not involve anything properly described as moral self-cultivation.

But let’s now consider what Mengzi (Mencius) says about moral self-cultivation.<sup>6</sup> Mengzi thinks human nature is fundamentally good, but also holds that even if we are to some extent already good, we can become

<sup>6</sup>See the *Mencius* (any edition).

much better. Yet even if we are innately good in the sense of having inborn benevolent impulses, it doesn't automatically follow that we will desire to become *better* people and deliberately take (effective) steps to do so, and Mengzi's picture of moral self-improvement is, therefore, radically incomplete. Nor does it really help to bring in the idea of (deliberately) extending our benevolence beyond a narrower circle to ever larger ones. Mengzi mentions this possibility or opportunity.<sup>7</sup> And the idea of such extension is often relied on in later Confucian (and neo-Confucian, etc.) discussions of moral self-cultivation. But a plausible account of why one would *want* to extend one's benevolence is never really offered, and, in addition, we are never really told how, in understandable psychological terms, the process of (deliberate) extension actually occurs. (Other people can get us to be more morally consistent in our emotional concerns, but it is a mistake to view this as involving moral *self*-cultivation.<sup>8</sup>)

Now later Confucianism often regarded the knowledge of the Confucian classics as a basis for moral (self-)improvement, but from everything I have read, those who have recommended such a course of study as a means to moral self-improvement don't tell us how the improvement actually, psychologically, occurs. And, frankly, I don't believe that this can at all easily be done. Reading certain works of literature that immerse the reader in the sorrows of certain other people (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a good example) can make and, we know, has made a great difference to how sensitive those readers are to other people's sufferings. And if the idea is that the Confucian classics can do this sort of thing for us, well, then, what is being said makes a lot of sense to me (though I don't know enough to judge whether those classics contain anything like the intense empathic moral lessons of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). But even if we can assume that the Chinese classics contain stories and examples that can help sensitize us morally, what is the motive for actually reading them? If the idea is that one is assigned these books in school or university, then there is an element of power assertion that can make one wonder just how much the student really will learn. And in any case even if one assumes that the student can learn moral lessons in such cases, the learning will certainly not count as an instance of moral *self*-cultivation or *self*-education. But perhaps the idea is that everyone wants

<sup>7</sup> *Mencius* 1A7, 7A15.

<sup>8</sup> I believe Bryan Van Norden makes this mistake in his *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 234–246.

to improve morally, so that if one realizes that the classics can improve one in that way, one has an obvious motive to immerse oneself in them.

However, for reasons explained earlier, I just don't get this. After one has hurt someone and had that fact placed very vividly before one, one may well feel bad and want to be better in certain specific ways (having to do with the hurt or harm one has brought about). But the general desire to be a morally better person: where is that supposed to come from? The desire for moral improvement and/or self-improvement can't simply be taken for granted. It needs to be psychologically explained in clear and convincing terms.

Now in fact the Confucian tradition seems to have such an explanation. It can say and has said that the desire for moral self-improvement may come from our admiration for certain traits and for certain individuals who seem to us to exemplify those traits (e.g., *Analects* 4.17, 7.22, and 7.24). So let's explore this new and final way in which one might try to defend Confucian ideas about moral self-cultivation.

First, admirable exemplars (or the admirable traits they exemplify) have to be brought to our attention, and it doesn't make sense to suppose that people go around looking for exemplars to emulate. If they did, and if they then proceeded to emulate those exemplars, that would be a process of self-cultivation in the fullest sense. But as I indicated, this is not how actual people learn whatever they learn from exemplars. I think, therefore, that the real question is whether, once one encounters or is shown an exemplar, a process of deliberate emulation can understandably take place along lines that can be reasonably described as moral self-cultivation. If acquaintance with the model or exemplar influences someone via the kind of unconscious or non-deliberate osmosis (of empathic concern) I described earlier, then the process isn't sufficiently deliberate or self-initiated to count as self-cultivation or self-shaping, so the Confucian who thinks the emulation of a moral model can be pursued in a deliberate and self-conscious way has to come up with a psychologically realistic way to explain how this latter can (frequently) happen.

Nor is it good enough, in this connection, simply to say that one's admiration for the exemplar is what gets one to emulate them in a deliberate way. We need to understand better *how* admiration can lead to emulation. After all, I may morally admire the person who gives one of their kidneys to a total stranger, but if I am as much attached (sorry!) to my own kidneys as most people are, I wouldn't want to be or become such a person. My present prudential self-concern would undercut any desire to

be like such a person. More generally, why should someone who is, say, already fairly altruistic (and empathic) want to embody the greater altruism (and empathic tendency) of some highly admirable exemplar? (Richard McCarty first brought this question to my attention many years ago.)

It is not enough to say that we will naturally want to become more like the highly moral exemplar because we realize that we will be better off, have a better life, if we do that. There are many reasons for doubting whether the person who is morally better than others will usually have a better life than those others (though see Chap. 6). But one also needs to ask how a desire to become morally better as a means to having a better life can actually lead to being morally better. If one's primary motive is and continues to be the ostensibly egoistic desire for a better life for oneself, then how can that represent, embody, or launch a *morally improved* state of personal character? It is just not clear how the primary desire for a better life for oneself will eventually yield to (or turn into?) the kind of intrinsic desire to help people and treat them fairly that we almost all think is essential to being a moral person.

But all right, then. Let's assume that admiration in itself gives one *some motive* to emulate a moral exemplar, a motive that needn't be egoistic, but that may be counteracted in cases like that of the kidney donation where the prudential risks of moral improvement can be considered too great. One will still have to ask how such a motive can initiate a process of moral self-improvement, and it is not easy to see how to answer this question. Wanting to be more like an admired moral model, do I simply perform actions like those I know the model has performed, actions presumably motivated by a desire to emulate that the model himself or herself wasn't motivated by? And how does this process lead me—and what reason do I really have to think it will lead me—to eventually develop the admired motives that the admired model originally acted from? Perhaps, then, I reason that if I read the Confucian classics that the model himself read, that will make me more like him—but I will also have to recognize that many people have read those classics without becoming like the model, and surely that should make me wonder whether reading those classics is the best way to go about improving myself morally. Similar thoughts are applicable to any attempt to improve oneself via rituals.

Up till now, I believe Confucian views about moral self-cultivation or overall self-shaping have been left pretty much without a realistic psychological foothold within the overall enterprise of (better) understanding how moral education and moral development more generally can and

actually do occur. Influential contemporary Confucians or Confucian scholars seem to believe in the promise and possibilities of moral self-cultivation just as much as the early Confucians did.<sup>9</sup> But my conclusions from everything that has been said here are, first, that present-day Confucian and other ethicists should *stop* being so preoccupied with moral self-cultivation and focus more of their attention on moral education *in general*; and, second, that discussions of moral self-cultivation from a Confucian perspective ought to be more skeptical than they have been.

But this still leaves the door open to Western ideas about self-cultivation and self-shaping that, as I have suggested, don't find any parallel within the Confucian or (as far as I know) within any other Eastern philosophical/ethical tradition. (Note that I am not and shall not be assuming that deliberate and radical moral self-improvement cannot involve substantial help from others.) So I think we now need to turn our attention to the somewhat different considerations and factors that Aristotle, Kant, and others in the West have emphasized as the basis for shaping ourselves overall into morally virtuous individuals.

#### 4

Let me begin with Aristotle. Our previous discussion focused mainly on Aristotle's views about how children morally learn from their parents, and we didn't discuss the further issue of whether someone acting on their own can make themselves into an ethically better or worse person and thereby be or become responsible for their own moral character. But the latter topic has at least this much in common with the former: what Aristotle says about the moral training of children and what he says about our responsibility for our own eventual moral character both depend crucially on the idea of the repetition of desirable actions, on habituation.

In Book III (especially Chap. 5) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), Aristotle directly discusses the question of (moral) responsibility for states of virtue and vice and for actions arising out of such states of character. He says that when we make voluntary choices, we are responsible for what we have done, can be praised or blamed for the actions we have chosen to perform, and he goes on to claim that the repeated choice, say, of unjust

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought*, Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979; and P. J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000.

actions will turn someone into an unjust person, someone with a settled disposition or habit of acting unjustly. He adds that ignorance of this last fact is the mark of a “thoroughly senseless person.” In other words, every intelligent person knows that if they act in a certain way all the time (or on many occasions and without ever acting in a contrary fashion), they will develop into a person with the habit of acting that way. So Aristotle holds that when someone has made themselves unjust in this kind of way and with this kind of antecedent knowledge, their resultant unjustness is voluntary and can therefore be blamed.

Now I argued earlier that if someone’s parents use power assertion to make them, say, attend church every Sunday, this may well not result in a settled habit that will survive once they no longer are under their parents’ control. (In fact, they may itch to stop going to church as soon as they can get away with it.) But one could claim that what one does under parental control or supervision is not really or entirely voluntary, and it would be possible then to claim, on behalf of what Aristotle says in Book III, Chap. 5, of the NE, that what is true of involuntary choices needn’t at all hold for voluntary ones. Even if choices made under strict parental supervision arguably don’t lay down a settled habit, that may be because the choices aren’t voluntary, and in that case, since the choices Aristotle in Book III speaks of as laying down or causing a habit are entirely voluntary, they may establish a habit even if less voluntary choices do not.

But is Aristotle right to say this sort of thing? He says that every sensible person knows that their voluntary choices will eventually turn into something settled and perhaps even unchangeable, but does every such person really know this? I tend to doubt it. In *The Methods of Ethics* Henry Sidgwick says that someone who believes they are free, will sometimes rationalize themselves into yielding to a certain kind of temptation (that they wish to be no longer subject to) on the grounds that they can *just as easily* start acting differently the next time they are tempted.<sup>10</sup> Now you can say with Aristotle that such people aren’t sensible or intelligent, but so many of us fall under this description that I think one should hesitate to agree with Aristotle about the obviousness of his claim that free choices lay down firm habits.

That claim, moreover, is not only not obvious but actually, and from a certain social-scientific standpoint, quite questionable. In the twentieth century, psychology as a field worked very hard on and with what is stan-

<sup>10</sup>7th edition, London: Macmillan, 1907, p. 67n.

dardly called the “law of effect,” according to which behavior that is rewarded in a given circumstance is more likely to repeat itself in similar circumstances in the future than it was likely to occur before it had ever been rewarded. The behaviorists relied on this idea (of course, it is vague because of the vagueness attaching to the notion of similarity and also, perhaps, to the idea of a reward). But the law of effect can certainly make sense apart from the (other) assumptions of behaviorism, and it is in any event clear that Aristotle’s argument about the results of voluntary actions doesn’t appeal to this law. He doesn’t say that certain voluntary actions become more likely to repeat themselves if they are rewarded. Rather, and in a more blanket fashion, he says that they are more likely to occur and become a strong habit once enough of that kind of voluntary action (on the part of the given agent) has occurred.

This idea corresponds, not to the law of effect, but to another “law” that behaviorists and others have spoken and written about, the so-called law of exercise. According to this law, behavior that wasn’t particularly likely to occur in a given kind of circumstance *c* becomes more likely to occur in similar circumstances in the future (simply) as a result of having occurred once (or perhaps several times) in *c*. This is very close to what Aristotle is saying and what he says every sensible person knows, but in fact psychologists have never plumped firmly in favor of the law of exercise in the way they pretty much have done in regard to the law of effect. The fact is that it is very difficult to be sure, either on experimental grounds or on commonsense grounds, that voluntary (or involuntary) choices tend to propel themselves forward into the future as habits or dispositions to act and to do so independently of being rewarded.

This has three theoretical consequences. One doesn’t, to begin with, have to be silly or unintelligent to doubt the law of exercise or to doubt what Aristotle says about sheer action tending to become habit. Aristotle says you do, but he seems mistaken about this. But then second, and more significantly for present purposes, even if (unrewarded) voluntary actions do tend to yield habits, the habit thus arrived at won’t have to count as voluntary on Aristotelian grounds to the extent the person who develops that habit had no idea, no clear notion, that his voluntary actions *were going to yield a habit*. Then, third and finally, there is reason to doubt that the voluntary actions will yield a habit unbeknownst to those to perform those actions (or even when they think that what they are doing will cause a habit to form). So Aristotle’s argument for the voluntariness and consequent blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, respectively, of habits of or

tendencies toward injustice or toward justice just won't fly. He has given us no good reason to think that we ever do substantially shape or make our own overall moral character in this way.

Nor can one help Aristotle out here, as some present-day Aristotelians have sought to do, by comparing the acquisition of moral virtue with the acquisition of a skill.<sup>11</sup> When I practice the piano and become more adept at playing, my nervous system cooperates, but no change of motivation need occur; however, if I copy the actions of some moral exemplar, I can become like them only if some motivational change occurs within me as a result of such "practice." And it is difficult in psychological terms to see how the practice or repetition can serve to implement this kind of change. But now on to Kant.

## 5

Kant deals with the issue of self-shaping in ways that are, well, distinctively Kant-like. For example, he is very interested in strength of will as a path to the overcoming of temptations, and Aristotle emphasizes this aspect of the moral life much less than Kant does. Also there is no assumption in Aristotle that we have a duty to shape ourselves into better people, whereas for Kant this is one of our most important (imperfect) duties. Now I don't want to dwell on this last issue because it isn't essential to the present argument. The question we need to address is whether we are capable of shaping ourselves into better people, not whether we have a duty to do so—though if we find that we cannot shape ourselves morally in any overall substantial way, then on Kantian assumptions we don't have any duty to do so and Kant will have been mistaken to think we do.

According to Kant, each time we exercise willpower to repress or inhibit impulses or desires that run contrary to our moral duty, we weaken the future force of those impulses/desires and make it easier for ourselves to resist them in the future.<sup>12</sup> So someone who understands this and who seeks (to fulfill his duty) to improve himself morally can do so by resisting given temptations (Kant is thinking especially of appetitive temptations). But can someone deliberately and effectively go about shaping themselves in this way?

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Daniel Russell, "Aristotle on Cultivating Virtue," in N. Snow, ed., *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck, NY: Macmillan, 1985, p. 195; and Paul Guyer, *Kant's System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005, pp. 136ff.

It all depends on the empirical assumption that resisting temptation on a given occasion makes it easier to do so subsequently, an assumption that Kant may have believed plausible, but that recent psychology casts a great deal of doubt on. Recent studies of willpower tend to show that it is vulnerable to all sorts of negative influences (fatigue and low blood sugar can decrease willpower) and that one's willpower can be depleted, at least in the short term, by one's having exercised it on a particular occasion. This last point works to some degree against Kant's assumptions about the consequences of exerting willpower, but of course the Kantian can reply that even if exercising willpower depletes it in the short term, it strengthens it in the long term or at least attenuates the desires against which the willpower has been exercised, in the longer run. But unfortunately there seems to be little or no empirical evidence even for this weaker assumption.

I was recently in email correspondence with Roy Baumeister, the co-author, with John Tierney, of a book called *Willpower: Rediscovering the greatest human strength*, that deals in more specific psychological terms with the phenomenon of willpower than Kant, Aristotle, or any other philosopher ever has.<sup>13</sup> And I asked him directly whether he thought willpower could be increased over time and the strength of tempting desires/impulses diminished over time by resisting temptations. His answer was that immediate temptations don't seem to lose their power as a result of earlier exercises of willpower, but that we can diminish our tendencies to give in to temptations by keeping them at a distance, that is, finding ways to avoid "occasions of sin" where a given temptation can exert an immediate influence over us.

In addition to talking of the ways in which the exercise of willpower can diminish our reserves of willpower in the short term and of the physical effects of fatigue, anger, and what have you on the efficacy or strength of our willpower, the book *Willpower* spends a great deal of time talking about how one can avoid tempting situations—e.g., staying away from streets with candy or ice cream shops whose allure one's sweet tooth finds hard to resist. And the book is far from alone in making this kind of point. David Watson and Roland Tharp's *Self-directed Behavior: Self-modification for Personal Adjustment* goes in great and admirable detail into the ways, for example, in which someone fighting the temptations of drugs, alcohol, gambling, overeating, or betting can "externalize" their problem in order

<sup>13</sup>See Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, NY: Penguin Press, 2011.

to deal with it.<sup>14</sup> If I tell everyone I know that I intend to lose weight, I have a motive to stay away from tempting shops or aisles in the supermarket that is additional to the reasons I initially had to try to lose weight: namely, the desire not to lose face with my friends and family. That motive can help tip the scale toward resisting temptations, even immediate temptations, but that doesn't mean that the (felt) strength of those immediate temptations has been in any way diminished by one's previous or recent good behavior. Rather, another factor or item has been put in the scales weighing against one's strong temptation toward overeating.

Similarly, someone who wants to stop taking a certain drug can sign up with a company dedicated to helping people overcome their drug habits in a way that also puts a strong factor or item in the scales against continued drug use. They can give the company a large sum of money and sign a contract with them that allows the company to confiscate that money if they test positive (or refuse to take a drug test) at the end of six or twelve months. The psychology literature in this area is full of excellent suggestions about how a person who wishes to change bad habits can do so. But none of that literature subscribes to the thesis Kant assumed to be true, the thesis that we can weaken the future strength of temptations/impulses by refusing to act on them.

However, the Kantian might then reply "So what? If we can learn to indirectly avoid giving in to the impulses that lead us morally astray, isn't that good enough, and doesn't that count as a form of self-shaping for the morally better?" Well, not so fast. Let's carefully examine what these indirect techniques for dealing with tempting impulses actually imply for the possibility of moral self-cultivation or self-shaping. It will help us to do this if we choose an illustrative (probably not entirely fictional) example of someone who wants and wants badly to change his habit, say, of gambling. Imagine that he has gambled in the past and, because he has lost money in doing so, has deprived his family of some of what they need for their comfort and safety. He has felt bad about this, but not bad enough to make him resolve to change his ways (he'd rather fight with his wife about the way he spends money than actually try to change the way he does).

Let us imagine, however, that at a certain point he loses a great sum of money, enough to actually impoverish his family, and seeing in particular what this means for his children, he feels much guiltier than he has ever previously felt: guilty enough, disgusted enough with himself, that he now

<sup>14</sup>9th edition, Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007.

and finally resolves to take steps to prevent himself from gambling in the future. Announcements to his friends might not be very effective here, but imagine that he thinks of a way in which he can ensure that his paycheck goes entirely to his wife and that all the places where he has bet or could bet have been put on notice that he is not to be given any credit for gambling purposes. Even if all this might not, as a matter of fact, be enough to prevent him from gambling again, let's just assume, in order to illustrate the relevant philosophical point, that it *is* enough or that he takes other measures that can effectively prevent him from ever gambling (e.g., making it impossible for himself to ever again possess a credit card). The potential dire results of his gambling are now painfully clear to him in a way that was never true or obvious before, and the shock and pain (to him) turn out to be enough to make him do things that render it impossible for him ever to gamble.

So the first question to ask is: has this man improved morally? And the answer is, at least on the surface, far from obvious. Isn't the only difference between the present situation and what had been the case previously the fact that he hadn't earlier done anything so terrible to his family? And how can a difference in consequences make a difference to his moral character, given especially that he presumably all along had the capacity for guilt that he is displaying as a result of what he has now done to his family?

Well, we have to be careful. His general capacity to feel guilt may well have been something he was born with, but guilt or guilty feeling can accumulate over time, and when it does or has, a given person may be primed to feel guilty for later misdeeds in a way he or she wasn't primed previously. In our example, it was assumed that the man had felt bad earlier for the (say) inconveniences his gambling had caused his family. And arguably (and plausibly) the earlier guilt primed him to feel even more guilty when he subsequently impoverishes his family (the family home has to be forfeited) than he would have felt if he hadn't earlier done things that made him feel somewhat guilty. Guilt can accumulate over time and as a result of a string of misdeeds, so we shouldn't assume, as we did above, that his capacity for guilt has always been the same. True, his basic capacity for guilt, his capacity, therefore, in one sense, hasn't changed; but if by capacity for guilt one means the man's actual(ized) *tendency* to feel guilt, then in that respect he has changed. The man will have a stronger tendency to feel guilt for gambling than he had originally and/or he will have a tendency to feel stronger guilt for a given act of gambling than he

had before his gambling started having dire effects on his family. All this is in fact relevant to the question whether he changes morally for the better.

To show you why, however, I need to bring in a simpler or more primitive case of inductive discipline to illustrate the same basic point. Martin Hoffman says that a single use of induction may not make a child resist all future (unprovoked) aggression against other children, but that if induction is used a few times, the child will eventually stop himself from aggressing against other children before the aggression can actually occur. Rather than just feel bad after the fact for aggressing, the accumulation of such bad feeling over a number and variety of instances can inhibit aggression before it occurs. In other words, the repeated instances of induction cause a build-up or increase of *motivational resistance* to aggressive action, and the child who goes through this process therefore emerges as less aggressive than they were previously. To that extent the child is a morally better individual than they were beforehand—induction is, after all, a form of moral *education*. And we can apply what has just been said about the moral education of children to the case of the man whose gambling has impoverished his family.

The man's earlier guilt in relation to the less harmful effects of his gambling paves the way toward the strong reaction he has when his gambling finally impoverishes his family. In parallel with cases of inductive discipline, the earlier bad feeling or guilt may not cause him to change his ways, stop gambling, but there may be a build-up of guilt nonetheless as a result of the earlier misdeeds, an increased resistance in the man to acts of gambling that reaches its full fruition when he impoverishes his family. The earlier bouts of guilt may well have softened him up for the incredibly strong guilt reaction he has when his gambling finally has utterly dire consequences. In other words and to reemphasize something I said earlier, there may have been an accumulated sense of guilt, a build-up of guilt, that causes the guilt reaction he has when he impoverishes his family to be much stronger than it would have been if this had been the first and only time he had gambled to ill effect, and we are supposing that that greater strength is what leads him, finally, to institute the changes in how he lives his life that make it impossible for him to gamble again. As in the case of the child who learns or comes to inhibit aggression through inductive discipline working on her or his natural empathic tendencies, the man who institutes such changes is plausibly regarded as a changed man, a better man than he was previously.

But doesn't he bring about this moral change himself—by bringing about the changes in himself and his environment that will prevent him from gambling again? If that is so, then we have an example of moral self-shaping, though its character will be quite different from what Kant imagined. The man won't have shaped himself into a person whose aberrant desires are less strong than they were: that would be moral self-improvement, but we have seen no reason to believe that he has improved himself in this way. Rather, and as we are now imagining things, he has, in reaction to the enormous guilt he felt (and continued to feel) when his gambling impoverished his family, shaped himself into a morally better person by deliberately making changes in the world and his power to affect the world that will prevent him from ever again gambling away his family's wealth and welfare. But is this the right way to view things? Does it make moral and conceptual sense? I think not.

Again, consider the case of induction. The child builds up more and more resistance to hurting or harming other children (or others more generally) till they reach the point where they no longer do aggressive things to other children. But when, we may ask, does the moral improvement occur? At the moment where, tempted as he might have been previously to hit another child, he inhibits that sort of action. Does that action *make* him into a better child or is it rather the *sign* of his moral improvement? Surely it must be the latter. The moral improvement occurs in stages as his resistance to hitting, say, builds up in response to repeated use by one parent or adult or another of inductive discipline that occurs on occasions when he actually has hurt someone and that focuses the child on the pain or harm he has (deliberately or thoughtlessly) caused to the other child/person. The actual inhibitory act is just a sign, is it not?, is just a sign or evidence that the process of changing the child's motivation vis-à-vis others has been (relatively and in one respect) successful. You don't have to be a virtue ethicist to see that the moral change occurs before the child acts, that is, refrains from acting aggressively. (Kantians might well agree.)

But then when we transpose these ideas back to the case of the gambler, we see that it is far from clear that the man we are imagining makes himself into a better person by (deliberately) instituting changes in the world and in his own power to affect the world that make it impossible for him to gamble. The motivational change, in parallel with the case of a child subjected to inductive discipline, occurs before the man actually initiated the changes necessary to undercut his possibilities of gambling. Indeed, it is

the motivational change in him that *causes* him to institute those changes. And it seems much more plausible to imagine that the motivational change constitutes, in his case, the moral change for the better that occurs in or for him, than to say, as we originally put it, that the moral change occurs through the actions that he initiates as a result of that motivational change.

Of course, the actions he initiates are under his control, and if the moral change occurs through those actions, it occurs as a result of his own choosing and counts as an instance of self-shaping. But if the moral change occurs through the accumulated strengthening of inhibitory guilt, then it is not something he deliberately caused, and he can't be said to have shaped himself morally into a better person. The guilt, rather, *shaped him*. And in that case we have still not found a plausible Kantian-type example of someone's deliberately or even non-deliberately shaping or making themselves into a morally better, much less a morally good, person. The idea of overall moral-self cultivation is less psychologically realistic and, consequently, less morally useful or relevant than the historic traditions of Eastern and Western thought have largely believed. Our moral development mainly depends on the intervention of others and on external factors that are largely beyond our own control. Philosophers East and West ought to start recognizing that.

Here too, then, we have another example of how difficult it is to think of our psychology in a realistic (or sober) way. The present chapter shows the unrealism and wishfully thinking quality of much that has been said about the human capacity for large-scale or overall moral self-cultivation. But in Chap. 2 we saw that Western philosophers, unlike the philosophers of China, have misunderstood how any psychology has to work. With Kant and Aristotle as prime examples, they have thought that it is possible for us to think or reason in the absence of all emotion and this is a ground-floor mistake about our psychology or any psychology and about what it is in most general terms to be an intelligent being, human or otherwise. And it is worth mentioning Kant and Aristotle in this connection because, as we saw in the present chapter, they also have inflated ideas about the human capacity for moral self-education and self-transformation. Whether the two errors are related is a very interesting question, one that invites further consideration on my own part and, I hope, yours. (I don't now see any easy way to answer it.) But I should also mention what Chap. 2 says about the error psychologists make when they *underestimate* the strength of the connection between empathy and altruism, which contrasts, of course, with the way so many philosophers have *overestimated* our capacity

for moral self-transformation. I don't think psychologists have been particularly prone to the same error. The most famous recent psychologist of moral education, Lawrence Kohlberg, speaks of stages of moral development but never suggests that the developing individual can take control of this process. And the same is also true of Martin Hoffman, who pioneered work in psychology on empathy and moral development.

So we have seen quite a sampling of errors of psychological unrealism or conceptual confusion in regard to the topics we have explored in our last two chapters here. In our next chapter, I shall be talking about various kinds of weaknesses or deficiencies in philosophical thought, and again some of these, perhaps even most of these, will involve problems having to do with psychology, though in most cases the intellectual fault will not lie with psychology or psychologists but with the way philosophers have shied away from and/or shown insensitivity to issues about human psychology that bear directly on the questions they address and seek to answer as philosophers.

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